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ABSTRACT

Family connections, traditional activities, educational goals, and fatalism are themes running throughout research and published observations about Appalachia. Information from 3 days of interviews with the author's grandmother, an 87-year-old Appalachian woman, is compared to these common research themes. The interviewee's experiences concerning family connections were consistent with the literature in that they revealed strong family ties and a marriage to a mentally and physically abusive man who kept her isolated at home. Traditional activities such as farming, canning, and quilting were all strongly present in the interviewee's life, which corresponded with findings in the literature. Much of the literature regarding Appalachian beliefs about education portrays Appalachians as being less interested in education, with many considering formal education as a substitute for hard work. Higher education, especially for women, is discouraged. The author's grandmother did not have those experiences. She graduated high in her class and intended to attend college, but finances prevented it. At age 67, she took a few college classes. The fatalism reported in research was not a dominant theme in the interviews, but threads of resignation were detected toward the hardships she endured. While the grandmother's life mirrored many of the research themes, her strength, dignity, and courage overshadowed their negativity. (Contains 20 references.) (TD)

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Lessons Learned from an Appalachian Heritage

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Abstract

Individuals in the Appalachian culture have much to share with the stories of their lives. Many of these stories contradict the stereotypes and misperceptions that surface in the literature related to Appalachian culture. This brief study compares excerpts from interview transcripts of an 87-year-old Appalachian woman, my grandmother, to themes pulled from research on Appalachian culture. The results are mixed with regard to how consistently her life reflects research findings, but the amazing spirit that she displays is very clear.

Introduction

I once read a comment made by Andy Rooney, "The world's best classroom is at the feet of an elderly person." Using this philosophy, I decided to investigate my Appalachian family background. I have read quite a bit on the topic of Appalachian culture, conducted research in the area of perceptions toward education in the culture, and lived my life in Appalachia, but I had never looked at my own family's heritage as a means of understanding a larger culture. In this study, I have used the stories told to me by my 87-year-old grandmother in a three-day interview as the data for comparison with established research about the Appalachian culture. At the time of the interviews, she did not know why I was asking the questions and freely shared as many stories as she could remember. I have compared and contrasted her stories with themes drawn from literature about Appalachia.

Methodology

This research is based on an account by an 87-year-old woman who has lived her entire life in Appalachian Kentucky and Ohio. Burnett (1991) argued that an account, also known as a narrative, is valuable as data because it can provide a direct route to information and insights about persons' experiences. She added that "significant social interactive phenomena occur 'behind closed doors' as part of intimate experience or private family life" (p. 123) and to gather those narratives helps researchers to support their observations and field survey result by checking them against the first-hand accounts of the people whom they study.

To obtain this particular account, the subject was asked to relate stories about her life and family over a three-day period of time in face-to-face sessions. Tucker, Weaver, and Berryman-Fink (1981) concluded that face-to-face interviews are preferable when complete or detailed answers are desirable, great amounts of time are required to collect data, and spontaneous reactions are desired. Emmert and Barker (1989) add that another

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advantage of face-to-face interviews is the enhanced ability to create a comfortable environment and to build rapport with the interviewee thus helping to generate more honest and complete responses. In this case, the atmosphere was very relaxed and comfortable and the interviewee was unaware of the research purpose in sharing this account until after all stories were told. Burnett (1991) adds that the use of open-ended questions to elicit accounts has a respectable history. In this instance, the interviewer asked very open questions such as "What are some of your favorite childhood memories? What were your experiences in school like? Tell me about your relationship with your family, etc."

My grandmother's background

My grandmother was born in Caldwell, Ohio in Noble County on October 2, 1914. She was the third child and the only daughter in a series of five children. Her family lived on and worked an 88-acre farm. She worked hard in the house and fields and was glad when school began each fall in a one-room schoolhouse for grades 1-8. She did well in school and skipped the eighth grade to attend high school where she played varsity basketball as a 5'1" freshman. She had no transportation to attend games, but she dated a young man who drove her to the games in his father's automobile. Her parents were never able to attend a single game in the four years she played on the varsity team. After high school, my grandmother took a position as a housekeeper and farm hand on a dairy farm. She had wanted to go to college, but there was no money with the Great Depression. She worked a few months as a milkmaid for $3 per week plus room and board before agreeing to marry the same high school boyfriend. She then entered a marriage that was abusive from the beginning. She had three sons and one daughter. After 47 years of marriage at the age of 65, she divorced this man when he forced her to decide between him and her mother who had had a series of strokes and needed care. My grandmother cared for her mother until her mother's death. After the funeral, my grandmother moved back to the 180-acre farm where she had lived with her husband. She had been awarded the house and a few acres in the divorce settlement, and he received most of the acreage and all of the personal property. She worked the few acres with gardens, an orchard, and a few chickens until she had a heart attack while digging post holes to set a grape arbor. She then took a position as a kitchen aide in a nursing home where she worked until her 80th birthday. She is a remarkably strong woman with a wealth of lessons to share, and I feel honored to know and love her.

Comparison of research themes to Appalachian experiences

Ergood (1991) summarized descriptions of the Appalachian people as "independent, kin-involved people whose lives are closely bound to their physical environment, whose activities are traditional, and whose beliefs are both fatalistic and religiously fundamentalist (p. 47)." Drawing from his description as well as a number of other sources, I established that *Family Connections, Traditional Activities, Educational Goals,* and *Fatalism* were themes running throughout research and published observations on Appalachia. After compiling research notes, I returned to the interview transcripts I had taken during my grandmother's storytelling, and compared elements of the themes.

Family Connections

A look at the literature. Montgomery (2000) argued that the age-old explanation of the relatively slow-changing Appalachia as isolation or geographical remoteness is unsatisfactory. Instead, he believes that the slow-paced culture is positively derived from strong cultural and traditional identity, social solidarity, and cohesiveness. After a review of the literature, it does appear that the family plays an influential role in the lives of Appalachian individuals since cultural values and assumptions are transferred indirectly from the culture to the child via primary caregivers (Harris & Liebert, 1987). Values and characteristics of the culture include having strong roots, being intensely loyal to one's family, keeping outsiders at a distance, being attached to one's geographic region, having a strong sense of religion and personal values, and being less open to change than other areas (Baldwin, 1996; Montgomery, 2000; Shinn, 1999). Jones (1991) added specific behaviors to the discussion of strong Appalachian family ties: Appalachian families take in relatives for extended periods of time; and they gather together without question to support each other in illness, death, and other times of sorrow.

Fitchen (1991) discussed the spousal communication patterns of poverty-stricken rural Appalachian families. She described a typical Appalachian wife who feels fear and insecurity about establishing an existence outside her family life. This portrayal included feelings of helplessness and dependence with a husband who makes all the family decisions and has most, if not all, of the interaction with the outside world. Fitchen also described how often threats of violence toward the wife, children, or even the husband himself would ensue if the woman showed signs of asserting independence.

My grandmother's experience. Most, if not all, of the experiences my grandmother related to me held strong family ties at the core. She told me many stories of her mother and father and their families as far back as three or four generations. She was very devoted to her mother, and had a strong relationship with her brothers. Amazingly when asked about any happy childhood memories, she did recount working in the fields with her brothers, "From the time I was about 6 years old, there I would be freckled and sunburned riding the horse bareback through the rows of corn while Willard (10-year-old brother) held the plow."

Unfortunately, my grandmother's marriage reflected the circumstances Fitchen (1991) described. She was isolated in the home, caring for the children with a mentally and physically abusive mate. She told heartbreaking stories of abuse toward her and the children, especially of my father. Her husband had girlfriends throughout the marriage, but she commented, "At least they kept him from pestering me." She tells the stories in such a matter-of-fact manner, but these are horrors that no woman should have to endure. When he found that she was pregnant with their first child, he gave her a cup of iodine to drink to "get rid of the problem." She did try to rely on her family in these times. Once she did leave with their children, in the time of the Depression. Her father insisted she return because they could not feed any other mouths in his household. She wanted to go live with her aunt Minnie, her mother's sister, but she thought her children would not be safe. Once at the age of five, she had stayed with them for a time while her mother was ill and her uncle molested her, "he took me to the basement and put his finger in me." It seemed at the time that her only recourse was to stay with her husband. Later, her own

daughter persuaded her time and again to give her husband another chance. "He had a lifetime of chances and just became more creative at his abuse."

Traditional Activities

A look at the literature. Scholarly research, fictional narratives, movies, and other forms of literature portray farming, hunting, canning, and quilting as a part of the traditional activities of Appalachian families. While farming, hunting, and canning might have been necessary to self-preservation, Jones (1991) ties the Appalachian value of beauty to the teaching and practice of good craftsmanship, such as woodworking or quilting.

My grandmother's experience. Farming, canning, and quilting were all present in my grandmother's and in my life. She talked of learning to graft fruit trees from her grandfather; filling a big cellar with bins of potatoes, sweet corn, and apples for winter; making pickles in large stone jars; taking corn and sugarcane to the mill for flour and sorghum molasses (eating cornmeal mush and milk for meal after meal); and picking wild blackberries with her mother (she "felt bad one year when we only were able to put up 88 quarts."). They had no refrigerator and she mentioned that the first time she ever saw Jell-o was in high school. Later, with her husband, she raised cattle and pigs, and baled fields of hay. My grandfather would drive the tractor while she would stack hay in bales on the wagon. Later when the tractor rolled and my grandfather was injured she took on the burdens alone with only my father to help. She would also tend to acres of gardens and orchards each year - freezing, canning, and selling produce at farmer's markets. I remember as a child my brothers and sisters running through her orchards and grape vineyards stopping to eat strawberries or grapes as we were playing. I also recall from my own childhood herding our pigs to market, milking cows and pasteurizing the milk, hunting eggs in the hen house, plucking chickens hanging from the clothesline, and freezing and canning food from our own gardens.

My grandmother also talked of learning to quilt. My great-grandmother would have quilting parties with a noon meal. She would cut squares from the men's pants as they wore out. My grandmother, from late childhood on, would help with the quilting. She recalled one woman who "made big stitches, so when she left we would pull all of her stitches out and I would requilt that part." My grandmother eventually taught my mother, her daughter-in-law (a woman not of Appalachian heritage) to quilt as well. I have some beautiful quilts as a result of my family's handiwork. She also taught my mother to garden, cook, and can fruits and vegetables.

Educational goals

A look at the literature. Much of the literature regarding Appalachian beliefs about education portrayed Appalachians as being less interested in education; however, while historically books and formal education may have been rare in Appalachian regions, they were often highly prized by the pioneer leaders (Higgs, Manning & Miller, 1995). But as the harsh conditions and the lives of hard work in the coal, agricultural, and timber industries took their toll, the descendants of these settlers eventually replaced the value of education with a strong work ethic, self-reliance, and commitment to family ("Appalachian people and culture"; Ergood & Kuhre, 1991; Higgs, et al., 1995). It has been argued that because of the geographic remoteness of the Appalachian area, its

culture has changed very little over the recent decades (Wilburn, falcon.jmu.edu) thus the move away from valuing education would still be considered a characteristic of the culture. Ironically, while many Appalachian characteristics such as attachment to family and place and self-reliance seem positive, they might be a factor in perpetuating the negative perceptions of education (Wallace & Diekroger, 2000).

Parental expectations have a significant impact on a child's academic success (Seginer, 1982). Children who consistently show superior academic ability tend to have parents who value education, create stimulating learning environments in the home, help with homework, and communicate often with teachers (Connors & Epstein, 1996; Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993). Seginer (1982) notes that "high achieving children come from families who have high expectations for them" (p. 4). Also, Hsiao (1992) found that "parents, siblings, and friends who have no experience of college or its rewards may be non-supportive or even obstructionist" (p. 1) toward those who pursue a college degree. In Appalachian families, there appears to be a general recognition that formal education is necessary for achievement, but many considered schooling to be merely a substitute for hard work (Ford, 1991). Wallace (2000) found that Appalachian individuals, especially women, were discouraged from pursuing a degree in higher education. Discouraging messages were received from family members 52.5% of the time with messages that ranged from being ignored when voicing a desire to attend college to being physically abused for attending college.

My grandmother's experience. My grandmother did not have those same stories to tell. She graduated high in her class and intended to attend college, but a lack of finances prevented it. She did attend a summer at "beauty school" to learn to cut hair. While her parents did not discourage her from college, they showed little interest in her schooling. She did go back to college at the age of 67 to attend a few classes. She entered an essay contest and won first prize for her essay. Interestingly, my grandmother's interest in higher education did not carry over to my father. He provided me with some very discouraging messages about attending college, and it took him several years to change his belief that I was not putting him or my family down by pursuing a degree.

Fatalism

A look at the literature. Ford (1962) defined "fatalism" as the shared premise that life is governed by external forces over which humans have little or no control, a cultural trait that seems out of place in a society that values progress, achievement, and success. Scholars have echoed Ford's claim that Appalachians are fatalistic, and it has become a fairly widely-held belief that this fatalism leads to a passive resignation of a life of poverty with little hopes of change (Ergood & Kuhre, 1991).

My grandmother's experience. When I asked my grandmother to tell me some stories about her childhood, she replied that her life had not been that interesting. She began by telling me stories of her mother's life. Eventually though, she shared her own stories many of which have been related above. Fatalism did not seem to be a dominant theme, although I can detect threads of resignation of the hardships she endured- "life was hard at that time for everyone." However, moreso I detect strength and acceptance of the people who might have been able to help her situation but did not. Although not

always successful, she did make efforts to leave her abusive husband, protect her children, and build a better life.

The final comment she made was about a neighbor who had addressed a question to her when she was a young child. He had asked, "Do you eat to live or live to eat?" As a child of about 10, she answered, "I live to be 21 and my own boss." She remarked to me, "I married at 18 and became my own boss at 65. I was finally let out of prison, my own person. After knowing the feeling of such freedom, no one can take that away from me again." My grandmother is a remarkable woman who has had a difficult life, but I have not known her to be pessimistic or depressed. She is strong and very willing to handle whatever circumstances come her way and will many times shoulder more hardship than is necessary if she feels that it will help someone else's plight.

Summary

Appalachian culture has been depicted in a negative light for decades. While several unfortunate and heartbreaking events have been described within this paper, I hope that the strength and dignity and courage of an Appalachian woman overshadow the negativity. My grandmother's life has mirrored many of the themes pulled from research (family connections, spousal dominance and abuse, traditional activities, and a lack of formal education), but her spirit, a product of the Appalachian culture, is unbreakable.

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